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SUBJECT: SAG "NEGLECTING" AND "FAILING" RURAL CONSTITUENTS,
SAY NGOS

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Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

Summary

11. (C) From October 21 to 23 emboffs visited rural Mpumalanga province, where human rights NGOs said the SAG was failing to protect the rural poor and neglecting to provide public services to remote communities. While township residents have protested violently over poor service delivery, rural residents are said to have low expectations of government. In a holdover from the apartheid era, many rural women raise children on very few resources while their husbands migrate to city jobs. Foreign migrants suffer the highest rates of wage abuse, but they are unlikely to complain for fear of deportation. Government housing is of a shockingly poor calibre. Although the SAG legislates to the highest of ideals, its execution continues to fall short, especially outside urban centers. End Summary.

Mpumalanga: Staid Farms, Angry Townships

12. (U) In the northeast of South Africa bordering Swaziland and Mozambique, Mpumalanga is a mainly rural province, home to vast agricultural farms and the renowned Kruger Park wildlife reserve. On large white-owned commercial farms, serviced by black workers, the social structure is little changed since 1994 (ref A). An "emergent" sector of small black-owned farms has been carved from the former tribal "homelands" of the apartheid era, as well as from the very few land grants made through SAG land reform initiatives. Pockets of industry are located in the west of the province, closer to Pretoria and Johannesburg, worked by laborers living in higher-density townships. The latter have grabbed headlines recently (ref B) with violent and destructive protests over non-delivery of public services and alleged corruption among officials. Very high unemployment persists, with many areas far exceeding the official 29 percent rate.

SAG Services Uneven, or Absent

13. (C) Human rights advocacy groups said few government services were reaching farm communities. Elizabeth "Maki" Molefe of The Rural Action Committee (TRAC) singled out the Department of Social Development (DSD) for praise in helping the poor access social grants, but she said other departments

were not getting into the field to cover remote rural areas. In a hot dry region, Molefe implied that SAG officials prefer the air-conditioned comfort of offices in the capital, letting groups like TRAC instruct them on issues faced by their constituencies. As for protection of farm hands' human rights, Molefe said the Department of Labor (SADOL) "is failing these workers," with inspectors who may be indifferent, ignorant of rules, or even bribed by farm owners. (Comment: the investigation process, comprised of a short pre-formatted questionnaire and interviews conducted in the presence of farm owners who can dismiss those who complain, does lend itself to perfunctory visits. End Comment.) Molefe's verdict on SAG performance was that by and large "our government has neglected these people."

Farm Workers' Low Expectations

¶4. (C) If the rural poor have not protested poor service delivery like their city cousins, it is not because they are Qdelivery like their city cousins, it is not because they are any less deprived (if anything they are more so), but rather because they have essentially no expectations of the SAG. Rural communities are used to going without services, explained Molefe; they do not expect them, and they are raised not to complain. Individuals are dispersed and uninformed: "It's so sad... They don't know their own entitlements." Large farms are run like worlds unto themselves, where workers depend on farm owners, not the state, to meet their needs. Asked what share of owners are generous employers, Molefe said maybe one in ten. Unlike in the Western Cape province, where farms are export-driven and

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sensitive to international scrutiny, "here there is no one watching over their shoulder." TRAC runs weekend workshops to help educate workers on their rights, but the balance of power still favors the owners.

Rural Women's Limited Options

¶5. (SBU) Rural women bear an especially heavy burden, often raising children alone with few resources or job options. In the village of Nkomazi, Daphne Nkozi of the Community Legal Advice Office described a common pattern (and apartheid holdover) of husbands leaving to work in city factories, while women and children are left behind in rural villages. When a husband dies, his wife often does not know how to claim his pension from his employer, or even in some cases how to trace where he worked. In many cases, the husband has rarely communicated with his wife and only come home a few times a year, sometimes eventually vanishing altogether.

¶6. (SBU) Nkozi opened the Office to provide women with paralegal support, and to dispense social grants on which she estimates 90 percent of local women depend. Employment opportunities for Nkomazi women are mainly domestic or farm work, the latter requiring them to leave home as early as 3:30 a.m. and return after dark because of limited public transport. Mostly absent, and largely illiterate, these moms cannot be role models for their children, a problem compounded by high rates of teacher absenteeism in schools. Asked what single SAG program would provide the greatest relief, Nkozi suggested economic development initiatives to provide women with sustainable livelihoods. An in-town processing plant for local crops, for example, would give them reliable jobs nearer to home.

Tensions with Foreign Migrants

¶7. (SBU) Mpumalanga has its share of foreign migrants, with

farm workers from Mozambique and Swaziland making up as much as half the labor force. Migrants are commonly said to work harder and suffer more wage abuses than South Africans, yet they are least likely to complain for fear of dismissal and deportation. (Other than in immediate border areas they are mostly documented with permits for farm work.) To inform incoming migrants of their legal rights, TRAC holds seminars at the border town -- informing newcomers of possible risks, and hearing returnees' experiences of mistreatment. Sadly, new "emergent" black-owned farms are reportedly worse than white-owned ones, driven by profit to exploit migrants by withholding wages and/or paying less than the minimum wage. Nkozi said farm owners liked to hire compliant Mozambicans, which incurred the resentment of South Africans. When the migrants worked hard and rose to the ranks of managers, they then preferred to hire fellow foreigners, further aggravating tensions with nationals.

House Collapses, but Loyalty Endures

¶8. (C) Asked about SAG service delivery, Nkozi invited emboffs to see for themselves by visiting two of her clients who were recipients of government-provided houses under the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) scheme. The first client was a man in a wheel chair, which had given him priority on the RDP waitlist but evidently no advantage in terms of housing quality. Masonry was sloppy, with unrowelled gobs of cement between cinder blocks, and there were no holed bricks for ventilation beneath the roof (as required). A shifting foundation had created centimeter-wide fissures in walls and floors. The small space with toilet promised indoor plumbing, except that the house was unconnected to any water or sewage lines, so the toilet was decorative only. (Note: asked about how such a shoddy job could pass quality control, Nkozi said it was probably subcontracted and not checked. By signing for the house, the man had unwittingly vouched for his satisfaction with it, and he now had no legal recourse. End Note.)

¶9. (SBU) Another client, an older man with one arm injured in a sling, was living in his second RDP house after the first had fallen in on him, rendering him henceforth unable to work. The masonry on his second house was relatively professional, but its roof of corrugated tin was unsealed against rain, which explained the colorful collection of buckets crowding the floors to catch leaks. A brand new dual

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sink sparkled in the kitchen, but as in the first house it was unconnected to any water source. The man's "Vote ANC" t-shirt prompted the obvious question of how satisfied he was with his party's track record on services. The response was emphatically positive: the ANC had won the liberation struggle; he had actively supported them (as a one-timed armed fighter) and would do so forever; and nothing else mattered.

COMMENT: Gilded Ideals, Grinding Reality

¶10. (C) This visit reflects the familiar dichotomy of South African governance: great laws, pity about the implementation. Since the advent of democracy in 1994 South Africa has drafted a world-class rights-based Constitution and an exemplary body of law aiming for dignity, liberty, and equality for all its people. After 15 years, the country still struggles to make those noble principles a reality. The SAG legislates to high ideals but is then unable to execute, especially outside urban population centers as it is plagued by skills shortages, graft, and corruption. It promises rural development but is often absent in rural areas. Its plans call for public services for the poor, but

RDP houses are a shocking display of disregard (or worse, corruption). Its ethos is that of a rainbow nation with full rights accorded to foreigners, but migrants are exploited at every turn, not least by black farmers. While the township protests show that some segments of society are fed up with the SAG's poor performance, other groups remain docile, and the ruling ANC has a base whose loyalty is unflinching even when the roof caves in. End Comment.

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